

Transport Research Summary

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Prolific Illegal Driving Behaviour: A Qualitative Study

Kate Skellington Orr, KSO Research
Paul Le Masurier and Shirley McCoard, MVA Consultancy

This report presents the findings from a qualitative study of prolific illegal driving behaviour, based on a number of depth interviews carried out with a segment of current car drivers living in Scotland. The work was intended to build on previous quantitative research evidence that has indicated that there is a 'hard core' of prolific non-compliant drivers on Scotland's roads, and across the UK more generally. The current work sought to add depth to current understanding of what characterises this group of offenders, what motivates their behaviour and how they may be persuaded to change their illegal driving practices in the future.

Main Findings

- Consistent with survey research, speeding was the most frequently reported illegal driving behaviour, in particular on roads with designated limits of 70 mph.
- Use of mobile phones for texting, emailing and making calls whilst driving was also common across the sample. Popular reasons given included use of mobile phones for work purposes or keeping in contact with family members. Respondents described feeling compelled to take/make such calls when driving and reported doing so on a regular basis.
- Seatbelt non-compliance as a driver was limited. Rear seatbelt non-compliance was far more widespread, and the law was not well understood.
- Few people disclosed personally driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs although many respondents expressed a view that drink and drug-driving was quite widespread among their peer groups.
- Most people perceived that there was always someone who they considered to be a 'worse offender' or who was prepared to commit a 'worse offence' on the roads than themselves. Many also perceived that their driving did not constitute truly risky or illegal practice.
- Confidence in one's own driving, bolstered by years of 'successful' driving, seems to result in high levels of self-efficacy and perceived behavioural control which dominate drivers' thinking and decision processes when driving illegally.
- Despite previous convictions for illegal driving, there was a low perceived risk of being caught again in the future. The perceived risks of harming either themselves or others as a result of their driving practices was also low.
- Recall of marketing campaigns targeted at safer driving was varied with little perceived impact of such campaigns on actual driver choices. Overall, feelings of guilt, remorse or the need to change existing driving habits were not observed.

Background

The research sought to provide insights into the attitudes and behaviours of a number of drivers who regularly engage in multiple non-compliant and illegal driving behaviours on Scotland's roads. These qualitative insights sought to complement existing quantitative data around drivers' attitudes and behaviours collected by Transport Scotland on an on-going basis.

Methodology

A total of 15 people were recruited using a free-find or opportunistic approach. Only those who were current car drivers, and who reported committing at least three different types of driving offence in the last 12 months were eligible for inclusion in the work.

Participants were of mixed gender, age (ranging from 18 to 62 years), driving experience and employment status. The sample was drawn from both urban areas (Glasgow, Dundee and Paisley) and more rural locations (Stonehaven, Eyemouth and Dunbar).

Despite assurances of anonymity, it must be recognised that the approach relied on self-reported behaviours and so all findings may be subject to some degree of respondent bias.

Main Findings

Consistent with quantitative survey research, speeding was the most prevalent of all self-reported illegal driving behaviours. This was especially true for people driving on main roads with designated speeds of 70 mph. This, it seems, was seen as a normative and socially acceptable behaviour and was not really considered as being illegal by any of those interviewed. People generally reported safer driving practices in '20's plenty' zones and residential areas, but speeding was also reported on rural and non-pedestrian minor roads.

Many of those interviewed also reported use of mobile phones to make and receive telephone calls whilst driving. Calls were made mainly for work or recreational purposes and, although people felt that such practice was socially unacceptable, it was not

considered as being as dangerous or to hold the same social stigma as either speeding in residential areas or drink-driving.

Very few people self-reported driving under the influence of illicit drugs or when over the legal alcohol limit but, among those who did report driving while intoxicated, this appears to occur in tandem with driving over the speed limits, as well as use of mobile phones.

Seatbelt non-compliance as a driver was reported by a few, mainly older female respondents, for whom the main failure to wear a restraint was during short, regular, low speed local journeys where it was seen as unnecessary. The regular failure to use restraints for longer journeys among any of those interviewed was not evident from this work. Rear seatbelt non-compliance was far more widespread, and the law was not well understood.

All but two of those interviewed combined at least one kind of speeding behaviour with one or more other type of illegal behaviour, if not as part of the same journey, then over time. The most common combination of illegal behaviours reported during the same journeys were speeding (usually either on the motorway/dual carriageway) and use of mobile phones for talking or texting.

Despite reporting frequent non-compliant driving behaviours, there was a shared view among the sample that there was always someone who was a 'worse offender' or someone who was prepared to commit a worse driving offence than themselves. This was often used as a defence for their own failure to comply with road safety laws.

People equated prolific illegal driving with severity, rather than frequency of risky or illegal driving behaviours and, on this basis, felt that their own behaviours were justified.

Other justifications for illegal driving included: they saw themselves as competent drivers; they considered their behaviours not to be risky or dangerous; that "everyone does it"; that they considered the laws not to be credible or up-to-date; and they were under pressures of time. Interestingly, while drivers offered an array of justifications for their behaviour, many also defended their driving in terms of a lack of intentionality, in particular for speeding.

Overwhelmingly, those interviewed also reported that their driving practices were largely habitual and done very much without thought. Overthinking one's driving practices was perceived to be potentially dangerous. All drivers expressed a need to feel 'in control' in order to be a safe driver, which all of them considered themselves to be.

There was very limited evidence of any illegal activities being undertaken purely for the purposes of producing positive emotional responses, e.g. thrill, excitement, or feelings of rebellion, etc. There was also no real evidence of counter-cultural norms being exerted over drivers to act illegally in order to 'fit in'. This may, of course, have been as a result of the nature of the sample recruited.

Where peer pressure does seem to be exerted is from colleagues who make some drivers feel obliged to answer phones for work purposes, or from close relatives or friends, who contact drivers for often insignificant purposes when they are driving, but whose calls drivers feel compelled to take, in case the subject is pressing. Overall, while 'known others' were more likely to play a part in contributing to drivers' commission of mobile phone offences, 'unknown others' were more likely to play a part in speeding offences (i.e. pressure to 'keep up').

Other external factors that appear to influence drivers' behaviours included: the traffic conditions in which they were driving; road types; and their consideration of the material costs to themselves from taking alternative actions. Whilst perceived self-efficacy and control perhaps outweighed these factors in determining driving behaviours overall, it seems that these variables do, nonetheless, play a part in explaining why people choose to drive illegally.

Many in the sample had incurred penalties for illegal driving. The range of illegal activities for which drivers had been caught was also quite diverse. That said, the previous penalties that had been received for illegal driving were not seen as a sufficient deterrent to future illegal driving. The inevitability of being caught at some point in the future seemed to be something that drivers were prepared to accept, as the number of times they would get caught, in comparison to the number of times they would perform their illegal behaviours, was seen as disproportionately small.

In contrast, direct and vicarious road traffic accident experience was scarce, and many drivers put this down to their own skills as a driver, their general awareness of risks and never putting themselves into situations that they perceived to be 'risky'. In the few cases where participants were able to describe accidents that they or known others had been involved in, these seemed to have had little lasting effects on their own driving behaviours and were often described as 'unlucky' or being outwith the driver's control. The implication here being that accidents are, to some extent, inevitable, but very rare.

There was mixed but generally poor recall of various local or national road safety marketing campaigns. Campaigns which demonstrate potential harm to self may not, it seems, be as effective as those that highlight risks to others. There was no clear relationship evident between the types of driving behaviours that people were demonstrating, and their recall of different advertisements.

Conclusions

This work suggests that many people are prepared to engage in illegal driving practices on a regular basis. The work has shown that, rather than there being a 'hard core', the number and range of drivers to whom the 'prolific illegal driver' label may be applied is perhaps much broader.

Social, cultural and peer factors all influence illegal driving, and people's perceptions of social norms appear to explain prolific illegal driving behaviour more than any individual driver characteristics. This suggests that holistic, population based approaches to changing behaviours may be needed rather than those directed at the individual.

Even among regular risky and illegal drivers, there is a lack of acknowledgement that driving as they do is really illegal, that they are 'real' criminals or that their 'crimes' have real social impacts. This has important implications both for how policies are tailored and marketing campaigns are directed, since the first step to reaching many of these drivers is to make them aware that the policies and campaigns are targeted at them, and not others.

This document, along with full research report of the project, and further information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Transport Scotland, can be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.transportscotland.gov.uk/analysis/research/publications>. If you have any further queries about social research, or would like further copies of this research findings summary document or the full research report, please contact us at info@transportscotland.gsi.gov.uk or on 0141 272 77100.

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